KENYA HAS KIBAKI DELIVERED?
Kenya The rise and fall of African Heritage

In 1995, the World Bank described Alan Donovan’s African Heritage gallery in Kenya as “the largest, most organised craft retail and wholesale operation in Africa... It is a pioneer, having raised handicrafts from the level of souvenir trinkets to objets d'art with world class appeal”. Now, Alan Donovan (left) tells in his new coffee-table book, My Journey through African Heritage, how the collapse of Kenya’s tourism industry, thanks to terrorism and the war in Iraq, led to the liquidation of the once prosperous African Heritage company.
Africa. For nearly 40 years, I searched for the continent's beauty and creativity, passing through the glorious sunrises and the magnificent sunsets that encompass the splendour and the calamity of each new day. To those outside its magnetic spell, Africa may seem incomprehensible, fathomless, in the primordial past. Yet, wherever we are in the world, everyone of us has an African ancestor, that much is almost certain. Africa is the cradle of humanity.

I stepped into the world of Africa over 30 years ago, as a food relief officer in Biafra, the former breakaway eastern region of Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation. I was thrust into a cruel and bitter war, a stunned witness to the famine and death. I watched helplessly as a people sacrificed their children to the vision of nationhood.

But as the shroud of despair and hopelessness lifted, I found an ageless and vibrant inner beauty. As a co-founder of African Heritage, the continent's first pan-African gallery, in Nairobi, Kenya, I discovered Africa's rich legacy of the world's art. By staging festivals and extravaganzas through a cultural outreach programme called Kenya's African Heritage Festival, I served as a conduit and catalyst to reveal the awesome beauty of Africa to its visitors and to others around the world.

Over 30 years after my arrival in Africa, I sit on the rooftop terrace of my house that overlooks the Nairobi National Park. In the distance, I see the distinctive ridges of the Ngong Hills, at the foot of which Baroness Karen Blixen had her coffee farm. Her life in Kenya epitomised the style (and sometimes the scandal) of the European settler community of the early 20th century.

As I gazed across the expansive Athi Plains stretching to the horizon, I think of Karen and her remarkable life, like a spirit hovering over those hills, and I ponder my fate and my future in Africa. I search the Ngong Hills with my eyes as I think of the decades I have spent in a country I love with a deep, almost fatal attraction.

After surviving a fire that devastated the first African Heritage - its galleries, workshops, stores and offices, coupled with recurrent floods, thefts, deaths, epidemics, disappointments and numerous other disasters, the final blow was the collapse of Kenya's legendary tourism industry, upon which our network of nearly 500 artisans and suppliers, as well as our 51 worldwide outlets were almost entirely dependent.

The first warning of Kenya's slide from its perch as one of the world's most desirable tourist destinations came when South Africa opened up after the demise of its shameful legacy of apartheid with the charismatic aura of its new president, Nelson Mandela. Then, the "El Nino" rains washed away Kenya's roads, which continued to deteriorate to the point where vehicles could no longer manage the potholes from Nairobi to Mombasa, let alone the craters leading to the country's game parks.

Thereafter, disastrous tribal clashes were unleashed by self-serving politicians who resisted the demise of a corrupt one-party state in the face of growing demands for democratic pluralism. African Heritage was forced to reduce its staff by more than 400 employees, and it hovered on the edge of bankruptcy for several years.

In late 2002, just as it appeared that tourism might pick up, terrorists struck again in Kenya, a country that has suffered more from terrorism than any country in Africa. This time terrorists decimated the Paradise, a hotel owned by Israelis on the Kenyan coast. This was followed by a failed effort to shoot down the very same El Al passenger jet in which the Paradise hotel's clients had just arrived. These attacks bore chilling similarities to earlier bombings and missile attacks in Kenya by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in the 1970s and 80s.

In the world of the 1970s and 80s, long before the 9/11 tragedy in New York gripped the world's psyche, these attacks by the predecessors of Al Qaeda did not cause a ripple in the traffic of tourists to Kenya.

However, December 2002 was a far different situation. The twin terrorist attacks sparked a plethora of adverse travel warnings from the US and Great Britain, and British Airways suspended all its flights to Kenya even though it continued its flights to Tel Aviv and New York.

The only ray of hope was the peaceful democratic election of a new government for Kenya which took over power at the dawn of 2003. After decades under an oppressive regime, abetted by corrupt ministers, Kenya was promised a new era of transparency and progress.

Adding to the overwhelming feelings of optimism, the US embassy in Nairobi phoned me while I was in Los Angeles, to ask if President George W. Bush could use my home for an official reception that very month. A parade of aides and secret service types trooped through, deciding to convert my front garden into a helipad for President Bush, his vice president, secretary of state, national security advisor, and other top officials who were to stop in Kenya before going on to an African economic conference in Mauritius.

I was excited and grateful that an American president would visit Kenya for the first time since 1914, when President Teddy Roosevelt wiped out some of the abundant wildlife during one of the most extravagant game safaris in the country's history. President Bush's visit would have sent all the right signals for Americans to follow him to Kenya. But, before I left Los Angeles, I learned through a CNN newscast that the president's visit to Africa had been cancelled. Indefinitely. Disappointed, I returned to Kenya.

What I had expected would be a renewal, a real springtime for Kenya, became the worst year in memory - the US launched a war in Iraq, spreading an encapsulating fear of terrorism which stalled Kenya, totally destroying the country's tourism market, the life-
blood of African Heritage. After 31 years in Kenya, the company was forced into liquidation. Then I had a vision of Karen Blixen’s state of mind when she was forced to put her most treasured possessions up for sale to pay her debts before her final journey back to Denmark.

It has been well over three years now, since the new Kenyan government has taken over but the people have received few, if any, of the bountiful blessings and just rewards they were promised and so abundantly deserve.

The government appears paralysed, unable or unwilling to rise to the task. We are faced with the daily reality of continuous squabbles, a truncated constitutional conference, ongoing commissions which track the shattering of a nation while political acrimony threatens to tear the government and country apart.

By bringing up the legacy of Karen Blixen, I realise that I risk waving a red flag to those who abhor all “colonial” writing and go so far as to label her writing as the “most dangerous” to the image of the African and Africa.

I totally disagree with the notion that Karen Blixen was a racist. She was a product of her time, yes, but the least likely candidate for the label of racist. What I like most about her writing, besides its eloquence, is when she said she came to Africa “to listen and learn”, not conquer, not to colonise, not to teach and not to civilise. This was what interested and endeared her to me.

I also came to Africa to listen and to learn. When I was interviewed once on Front Row, a programme on South African television, the interviewer looked at me like I was daft when I told her I had come to Africa to find the “masters”, those unnamed geniuses who produced the masks, sculptures and textiles that attracted me with such wonder.

“Have you found them?” she asked, clearly startled. I could give no answer. I suppose I have not found them, but my quest in looking for them has always been rewarding.

A sturdy prejudice exists in the “West” when it comes to African objects – a prejudice which does not arise when discussing objects from any place in the world. If the object has not been seen in a museum or a book on African art, then it is not “African” regardless of who created it. Besides, if the object is not something to hang on the wall or adorn one’s table, it cannot be “art”.

After living amongst the Turkana in northern Kenya for several months, I wanted to exhibit Turkana items as “art”, and I did so in Nairobi over 30 years ago. But when I tried to exhibit these objects in America as “art”, I was told they were artefacts, utensils or “functional” items. The Turkana do not need paintings on their walls or on their donkeys. Their instincts and talents in producing their phenomenal designs is clearly Art. Period.

Why would I want to pay $3m for a painting of a Campbell’s soup can, a “functional” item reproduced by the American artist, Andy Warhol? This artefact may have been characteristic or pivotal in a period of Western consumerism, but is it art?

Why would I want to spend $4m on a Matisse appliqué when I know his appliqués were largely inspired by Bakuba palm fibre tapestries from the Congo? The tapestries are far more lively and beautiful than a flat canvas. Their techniques, designs and concepts are far more interesting. Besides you can buy one for a few hundred dollars.

Matisse displayed his collection of Bakuba tapestries at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1938. Picasso had a huge collection of them, and African sculptures were a critical inspiration to his work – that is how these items were first seen in Europe. That is one reason “traditional” African art is so at home with what is called contemporary or “modern” art. Why not go to the masters?

Time goes on and, sitting on my roof once again, I watch the grass of the savannah rapidly fade from verdant green to sombre tones of brown and tan, signifying the coming months of hot weather, here, near the equator, as I contemplate selling my house and leaving Kenya.

As the sun sets behind the Ngong Hills, I remember Karen’s parting words as she prepared her final exit from Kenya immortalised in her book, Out of Africa: “...It was not I who was going away. I did not have it in my power to leave Africa, but it was the country that was slowly and gravely withdrawing from me, like the sea at ebb tide.”

Sadly, many items shown in my book have disappeared... others will soon follow. As local demand for traditional items dries up, artists and craftspeople are forced to seek out new markets. As Africans have embraced new religions and modern ways, their traditions have changed, some have vanished. We may lose in less than a century what took ancient cultures millennia to create.

It was the fervent ambition of my co-founders, the late Joseph and Sheila Murumbi, to encourage Africans to collect, and to preserve their own culture as part of their daily lives. My house shows Africans, as well as visitors from abroad, how to live with African art and crafts, which hopefully is a step towards preservation. "NA"